

Focus markers that link topic and comment

Anne Schwarz, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
anne.schwarz@rz.hu-berlin.de

This talk deals with the interdependence between the pragmatic categories topic and focus as displayed by certain alleged focus marking particles of some West African languages. The particles (*la* in Moore, Dagaare, Dagbani, Gurene, Konkomba, particle *ká* in Buli, particle *wa/wo* in Konni, and others in further Gur languages of the Oti-Volta branch) occur under several focus conditions. Most researches have come to the conclusion that – even though the particles reveal certain polar, aspectual and modal preferences – they serve pragmatic functions and they have often analyzed them as “focus marker” (Bodomo 2000, Dakubu and Saanchi 1997, Olawsky 1999, Schwarz 2007).

Recent research, however, suggests that the particles are actually linking topic and comment rather than functioning as focus markers. Recognizing the particles’ close relation with the pragmatically unmarked topic-comment structure (Lambrecht 1994), I will argue that these languages have no structurally relevant focus-background layer independent of the topic-comment organization. Thorough data exploration leads to an analysis that underlines the importance of the pragmatic topic notion and the often underestimated thetic/categorical distinction (Güldemann 1996, Krifka 2007, Sasse 1987, 1995, 2006, Ulrich 1988, Wehr 1984) linked to it: I will discuss the major problems with the existing focus marker analysis and bring forth arguments in favour of a more basic topic-linking function that these particles exert by occurring in the comment of most categorical utterances.

- Bodomo, A. 2000. *Dàgáárè*. Munich u.a.: Lincom Europa.
- Dakubu, M.E. Kropp, and Saanchi, A. 1997. Broad and narrow focus in Dagaare. Ms. Legon.
- Güldemann, T. 1996. *Verbalmorphologie und Nebenprädikationen im Bantu. Eine Studie zur funktional motivierten Genese eines konjugationalen Subsystem*. Bochum: Brockmeyer.
- Krifka, M. 2007. Basic notions of information structure. In *The notions of information structure*. Working Papers of the SFB 632, Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure (ISIS), eds. C. Féry, G. Fanselow and M. Krifka, 13-56. Potsdam.
- Lambrecht, K. 1994. *Information structure and sentence form. Topic, focus, and the mental representations of discourse referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olawsky, K. J. 1999. *Aspects of Dagbani grammar. With special emphasis on phonology and morphology*. Munich u.a.: Lincom Europa.
- Sasse, H.-J. 1987. The thetic/categorical distinction revisited. *Linguistics* 25:511-580.
- 1995. ‘Theticity’ and VS order: A case study. In *Verb-subject order and theticity in European languages* (Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung, 48:1/2), eds. Y. Matras and H.-J. Sasse, 3-31. Berlin.
 - 2006. Theticity. In *Pragmatic organization of discourse in the languages of Europe*, eds. G. Bernini and M. L. Schwarz, 255-308. Berlin u.a.: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schwarz, A. 2007. The particles *lé* and *lá* in the grammar of Konkomba. In *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure (ISIS)*, eds. S. Ishihara, S. Jannedy and A. Schwarz, 115-139. Potsdam.
- Ulrich, M. 1988. Thetisch vs. kategorisch und Informationsstruktur. In *Energeia und Ergon: Sprachliche Variation – Sprachgeschichte – Sprachtypologie*, eds. J. Albrecht, H. Thun und J. Lüdtke, 387-399. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
- Wehr, B. 1984. *Diskurs-Strategien im Romanischen*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.